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SEP 3 1981

# Don't Let Caricatures Get You Down

A SPEAKER at the annual meeting of the American Chemical Society a few days ago criticized the portrayal of scientists by television and movies as mad geniuses bent on evil.

One of these cartoon characters was a Dr. Nerdnik who wanted to shrink all people to a height of three inches to solve the population and agricultural land problems," the speaker moaned. He feared such images might scare potentially brilliant scientists into other careers.

A local teacher wrote the editor to complain about cartoonists who depict a teacher "as a grotesque witch figure or the old-fashioned school marm." She said they don't look like that.

It is common on TV and in movies to see preachers characterized as less-than-smart, pulpit-pounding, Bible-thumping orators.

Newspaper reporters are parodied as chain-smoking, hard-drinking, arrogant individuals throwing their weight around.

TV weather announcers now are

meteorologists and they may wince every time they see the weatherman burlesqued as a whiskered odd-ball in Grecian gown and a weather vane in his top hat.

Farmers are readily recognizable when sketched in overalls and straw hats, with wisps of straw sticking from their mouths.

The president of the United States, because of his daily appearance in the news, is a special target for caricatures. Cartoonists emphasize his peculiarities to the point of appearing ridiculous.

Who doesn't remember FDR's tilted cigarette holder and fixed smile, Harry Truman's bantam rooster look, the inane grin attributed to Eisenhower, and Nixon's upraised arms and victory sign? President Reagan usually is shown as a wrinkled "prune face."

Probably there is no profession, race or group that has not been caricatured by ludicrous distortion of physical or other traits that some people might prefer to have disregarded.

There are reasons for such portrayals. One is that stressing peculiar or distinctive features facilitates identification of the individuals or groups. Caricatures may be composites of traits of many individuals, but they generally have foundation in fact.

The appeal of caricatures is that they help us to see humorous aspects in people. Some people even laugh at themselves.

In his well-known poem, "To a louse," Robert Burns wrote:

"O wad some power the giftie gie us

"To see oursel as others see us!

"It wad frae monie a blunder free us,

"An' foolish notion."

The needle of caricature may prick deeply at times, but if somebody sees us that way, maybe we ought to join the party and laugh with the others. If we really don't like it, maybe we could try to change our habits or those of our profession.